TOWN CENTRE IMPROVEMENTS

Report by Scrutiny Panel A on behalf of the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee

August 2023

1.   Executive Summary

At a time of global economic uncertainty, there are opportunities for Lincolnshire, many of which are driven or facilitated by our towns and in particular high streets and market towns as places to visit, shop, socialise and do business.

In this context, the Panel's Report reviews the local and strategic responses available to the County Council to enable it to effectively support Lincolnshire's high streets and market towns to:

- maximise existing opportunities;
- to achieve economic and environmental sustainability;
- to help stimulate the visitor economy;
- to support job creation and business growth and start up in town centres and
- to diversify the town centre offer to make it more attractive to new users including younger people.

In recent years, market towns and high streets across the UK have been hit by a perfect storm. This includes structural change to the way that consumers shop and the ways that businesses interact with each other as innovation in online shopping and digital and social media platforms have hastened a decline in physical footfall. This began before the pandemic but was accelerated by it.

The economic effect of the pandemic and latterly the cost-of-living crisis have impacted the bottom line of high street businesses – with retailers, services and hospitality businesses experiencing high numbers of closures as consumers have restricted their discretionary spend at the same time as businesses have increased prices due to increased input costs (energy, fuel, rent etc).

Nationally high streets and market towns have changed or are changing significantly with some experiencing visible decay particularly around long term vacant commercial properties and reduced service offers such as the closure of high street banks. Others display a lack of investment in developing a high-quality public realm (including street furniture, public art, parks, and paths/public rights of way).

However, some towns are thriving, having successfully developed specific, compelling offers that have set them apart from homogenous high streets and drawn people back to in-person visits, often for leisure as well as retail visits. This was in play before the pandemic but has more recently benefitted from people having looked 'local' throughout 2020 and 2021 to meet their purchasing needs.

Accordingly, the Scrutiny Panel has sought to examine the current needs of businesses on the high streets of Lincolnshire, accounting for the impacts of the pandemic and transition and

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exit from the EU and sought to link opportunities for a 'green recovery' as a means of creating sustainable, stronger, and resilient high street communities.

Moreover, the Panel's work has accounted for the impact of the extensive level of current and planned town centre investment and how its recommendations can add value to that.

An important element of the Panel's work is the recognition of changes in behaviours including shopping, land use and the impact of technology on the future of high streets across Lincolnshire and how that changes the infrastructure and services needed in town centres.

Furthermore, many stakeholders support and influence our town centres: public, private and third sector as well as the communities who live there and individuals who visit. The Panel heard from expert witnesses and considered a wide range of evidence; however, the Panel has focussed specifically on the role of Lincolnshire County Council and what it can do to affect change. Account is taken of activities being undertaken by other local stakeholders and all recommendations seek to be complimentary to planned and current activity.

As such, the Panel also undertook the review in the context of how any proposed interventions will enable Lincolnshire County Council to maximise the impact and delivery of the Corporate Plan's four ambitions for Lincolnshire which are:

1. High aspirations
2. The opportunity to enjoy life to the full
3. Thriving environments
4. Good-value council services

The recommendations within this report seek to support our key findings and some key strategic areas for improvement, which focus on:

- Leadership and Policy
- High Street Businesses
- Placemaking, Funding and Skills
- Technologies, Innovation and Digitalisation
- Data-Driven Decision Making & Targeted Investment, and
- Green Growth

Scrutiny Panel A has agreed the following recommendations for the Executive's consideration:

Recommendation 1 - Leadership and Policy

That Lincolnshire County Council engage annually with each of the established 8 Local Transport Boards (LTB) to discuss town centres. This will bring together local strategic partners to discuss and agree actions to address local town centre issues and opportunities and will promote cohesive action with short, medium, and long- term outcomes.

This builds on the Panel's conclusions set out in section 3.3 that recognises the need for:

- **extensive cross-sectoral partnership activity which is being informed by local needs**;
- proactive planning and collaboration as an **important mechanism to bring together other ingredients of success to high streets** such as car parking, cycling storage, and public transport; and
- the vital role of **neighbourhood plans** which can bring together the local community's input and help support local shopping areas that meet local needs and will therefore drive ongoing use.

Further the LTB approach will provide opportunities for towns and villages, in close proximity, to work together to best effect.

Recommendation 2 - High Street Businesses

(a) That the County Council lobbies those organisations that restrict businesses and support further streamlining of administrative processes for town centre businesses, including licencing.

(b) That the County Council be supportive of High Street businesses by developing a Single point of Contact (SPOC) for town centre matters; and streamlining processes internally to support businesses.

(c) That the Business Lincolnshire Growth Hub seeks to support an enterprise culture in town centres where services are available.

(d) That opportunities be considered through regulatory services, such as Trading Standards, to offer selected business advice to support town centre business start-ups.

(e) That a pilot be explored to '*keep the local spend local*', working with Lincolnshire County Council's procurement, partners and existing '*buy local*' initiatives.

Recommendation 3 – Placemaking, Funding and Skills

(a) That Lincolnshire County Council work with North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council to recognise the vital role of market towns in Greater Lincolnshire and to review opportunities for appropriate funding and budgets to support their viability and vitality (including infrastructure provisions) as a key ingredient in growing the economy of Greater Lincolnshire (referenced in Section 4 – Leadership and Strategy).

(b) That the County Council encourage good design across town centres through its development management functions and through partnership working with teams at Local Planning Authorities and other stakeholders.

(c) That design excellence, local distinctiveness, and character of town centres are encouraged through partnership working (under guidance from the Historic Places Team); and that quality public realm offers/green spaces are created to provide residents and visitors with the opportunity to increase dwell time and to support health and wellbeing objectives and help develop Lincolnshire's visitor economy (this links to recommendation 2b).

(d) That consideration be given to each County Councillor receiving a £3,000 budget to support local activities aimed at increasing town centre footfall. Funding to be allocated through an established criteria and aligned to the work and findings of the LTBs (this links to recommendation 1).

Recommendation 4 - Technology, Innovation and Digitisation

(a) That Lincolnshire County Council takes a firm view on developments and lobby government so that planning authorities have a greater say in the siting of 5G infrastructure.

(b) That the County Council support initiatives to drive digital skills amongst people who work in town centres, where appropriate.

(c) That Lincolnshire County Council test community and visitor opportunities to '*digitise the high street*', working in partnership with local areas to ensure content is created and managed in real time, along the lines of the pilots currently being developed in Holbeach and Mablethorpe (this will build on the work of the Council's Historic Environment Team and look at other opportunities to animate spaces including the use of pop-up museums).

Recommendation 5 - Data-Driven Decision Making & Targeted Investment

That data and lessons captured through pilots, including digital highstreets and Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure fund are used to inform better business cases to support interventions and investments in town centres.

Recommendation 6 – Green Growth

That Lincolnshire County Council: -

(a) Develop a digital Green Retail/Hospitality Guide aimed at supporting independent businesses.

(b) Improve facilities to encourage bike use on high streets (basic Sheffield stands) – linking to the work of the LTBs.

(c) Encourage the use of service budgets to improve outcomes through investing in pilot activity, where benefits are aligned to the County Council's aspirations for inclusive green growth.

2. Terms of Reference and Approach to the Review

2.1 Approval of the Review

On 30 September 2021, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board considered and approved a review of Town Centre Improvements in the context of stimulating new business and employment opportunities, reviving retail, and supporting a broader demographic to use town centres, notably by younger people. The terms of reference were agreed at the first meeting of Scrutiny Panel A in January 2022. In effect, this would be an in-depth review of current needs and opportunities emerging in Lincolnshire town centres (excluding Lincoln), high streets and market towns. These terms are used interchangeably throughout the report.

The Scrutiny Panel comprised Councillors Phil Dilks (Chairman), Tracey Carter (Vice Chairman), Stephen Bunney, Mrs Julie Killey, Noi Sear, Adam Stokes, and Mark Whittington.

2.2 Terms of Reference

The following key lines of enquiry for the scrutiny review were agreed by the Panel:

(1) Understanding changes in behaviours, shopping, land use and the impact of technology on the future of high streets across Lincolnshire and how that changes the infrastructure and services needed in town centres.

> We believe we have achieved this by:
>
> a. reviewing national policies;
> b. considering best practice;
> c. analysing trends; and
> d. considering national and regional reports.

(2)   Consider the delivery of existing Towns Fund deals; future project pipelines and the ways in which the Council could effectively support such changes and projects.

> We believe we have achieved this by:
>
> a. reviewing national policies and funding;
> b. reviewing local activity and assessing best practice responses across the UK;
> c. commissioning and considering evidence from case studies;
> d. analysing town-focused infrastructure needs at a local level through the Greater Lincolnshire Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Framework (SIDF); and
> e. assessing the Council's current activities to determine where current and future activity can add value.

(3)   Examine how the Council can support the needs of businesses (including retail and hospitality sectors) in town centres, including hardships arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and the EU Transition.

> We believe we have achieved this by:
>
> a. analysing Business Lincolnshire (Growth Hub) activity and support;
> b. considering the impact of the support provided through the Lincolnshire County Council-led Covid-19 responses (comprising Rural Business Grant, Business Recovery Fund, Invest for the Future and Digital Voucher Scheme);
> c. meeting representatives from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce (CoC); and
> d. researching and analysing business needs/offers elsewhere, including assessments of *what works*.

(4)   Identify the best practice of supporting green recovery of the high street.

> We believe we have achieved this by:
>
> a. reviewing evidence; and
> b. considering the context of the County Council's Green Masterplan.

Building on the above the aim of this report is: **"*to consider how Lincolnshire County Council could develop its leadership and support Lincolnshire's high streets to maximise existing opportunities, to achieve economic sustainability, to recover from the pandemic and to help stimulate a visitor economy as well as to support job creation in town centres*."**

2.3   Approaches to the Review

The Panel met twelve times between January 2022 and April 2023. A series of site visits and workshops were also conducted throughout the duration of this review. Previous scrutiny activity on this subject is set out in **Appendix A**.   Some specific areas explored by this review included:

- engagement with business representatives to determine business needs in town centres and to explore business-led opportunities to improve the place-based offer to increase footfall and visitor numbers;

- the visitor economy, heritage and the Lincolnshire Extensive Urban Survey project;

- placemaking - what makes our town centres special to their communities and attractive to visitors;

- high street challenges and opportunities;

- decarbonisation and net zero - what towns can meaningfully do; and

- infrastructure needs in town centres.

Importantly, the Panel did not focus on the city centre of Lincoln, as its needs do not, for the most part, coincide with the needs of market towns and smaller town centres.

Further, whilst four town case studies were undertaken, no recommendations are made specific to these four towns, and we believe they can be applied in full or part to many of the towns in Lincolnshire whilst maintaining local distinctiveness.

The report refers in places to 'public sector' and 'local government' – this covers both district and upper tier functions and may require a combination of roles to achieve successful change or adaption. As a guide, Table 1, on the next page, sets out the split of statutory and discretionary functions in a two-tier geography.

Table 1 – Two tier local government roles and responsibilities Bold denotes services that have a key impact/bearing on Lincolnshire high streets in particular	
Role/Activity	**Responsibility**
Adult social care	County
Arts/culture	**Both**
Building Regs	District
Births, Deaths, Marriages - registration	County
Burials and cremations	District
Childrens Services	County
Coastal protection	Both
Community Safety	**District**
Concessionary Travel	**County**
Council Tax and Business Rates collection	**District**
Consumer Protection	**County**
Economic Development	**Both**
Education and Related Services	County
Elections/Electoral Register	District
Emergency Planning	County
Environmental Health	**District**
Highways and Roads	**County**
Housing	**District**
Leisure Centres and Parks	**District**
Libraries	**County**
Licensing	**District**
Local Planning	**District**
Markets and Fairs	**District**
Museums and Galleries	**Both**
Parking	**Both**
Public Conveniences	**District**
Public Health	County
Strategic Planning	County
Street cleaning, waste collection and recycling	**District**
Tourism	**Both**
Trading Standards	**County**
Waste Disposal	**County**

2.4   Contributors to the Review

We would like to record our thanks to the following contributors, who attended our meetings:

- Justin Brown, Assistant Director – Growth
- Vanessa Strange, Head of Infrastructure Investment
- Mandy Ramm, Funding, and Investment Manager
- Warren Peppard, Head of Development Management
- Samantha Harrison, Head of Economic Development
- Mary Powell, Place, and Investment Manager
- Ian George, Historic Places Manager
- Nicola Grayson, Extensive Urban Survey Project Officer
- Jeanne Gibson, Programme Leader, Minor Works, and Traffic
- Simon Beardsley, Chief Executive, Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce
- Katrina Pierce, Development Manager, Lincolnshire Federation of Small Businesses
- Steve Kemp, Director, OpenPlan

In addition, we would like to thank the ten town and parish councils (Alford, Coningsby, Crowland, Holbeach, Horncastle, Long Sutton, Louth, Mablethorpe and Sutton, Market Rasen and Sleaford), who responded to our survey.

Contributions were also received from the Lincolnshire Youth Council (Voices4Choices – Boston and South Holland; Voices4Choices – Lincoln and West Lindsey; and Lincolnshire Young Voices). Their views are captured in Appendix F**.**

A variety of players exist in looking after and developing the market town and town centres in Lincolnshire. From Town and District Councils to coalitions and networks of local businesses, communities, and the voluntary sector. The Panel has been vigilant to understand and recognise these different roles and any plans that are in place for investment now or in the future. Accordingly, the Panel's recommendations are strategic and seek to add value to developing a place-based approach to developing vital and viable town centres in Lincolnshire.

3. National Policy and External Funding

3.1   Introduction

High streets can be lively, dynamic, exciting and social places that give a sense of belonging and trust to a community (The Portas Review, 2011)[1].

National and local government has focused extensively on high street recovery over recent years, from support to address structural change in the high street, to the recovery from the pandemic, through to the focus of the planning system. Further, significant investment has been awarded to high streets and towns as a means of supporting economic recovery post covid and as part of reviving communities.

We believe that there are opportunities in Lincolnshire to consolidate, expand or develop place-based activities that will create town centres that attract people to visit, shop, socialise and do business.

3.2   Summary of National Policies and Funding

3.2.1   Build Back Better High Streets Strategy

Since 2019, Government has invested in a variety of high street programmes including the £830m Future high Streets Fund to '*renew and reshape town centres'*, the £2.4 billion Towns Fund to '*unleash the economic potential'* of towns, the £95 million invested in High Streets Heritage Action Zones and £2.6 billion of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) resources to '*restore local pride across the UK'*. UKSPF supports three main areas of investment:

- Improving communities and places
- People and skills and
- Supporting local businesses

A breakdown of the government funding received in Lincolnshire is included in Appendix B.

In July 2021, the Government published its *Build Back Better High Streets Strategy[2]*, which sets out the government's long-term plan to '*support the evolution of high streets into thriving places to work, visit and live'.* The strategy seeks to:

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[1]   For the full report please visit The Portas Review
[2]   For more information please refer to (Build Back Better High Streets Report (publishing.service.gov.uk)

> ➢ make it easier to convert empty shops into new uses, including housing;
> ➢ grant automatic rights for pubs, restaurants, and cafes to allow takeaway and allow al fresco dining; and
> ➢ make high streets safer and cleaner.

Build Back Better (supplement June 2020) focused in on independent retailers, independent hospitality and independent service businesses.

3.2.2 Levelling-Up the United Kingdom

The Government published its White Paper *Levelling-Up the United Kingdom* on 2 February 2022[3]. In addition to confirming the aims of the Government's funding streams (see below), the Government put forward further measures that *'can make high streets and town centres the thriving hearts of our communities'*. This referred to reforming local taxation to help support local high street revival. Several of the proposals requiring legislation were included in the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill which is currently going through its committee stages. The Bill includes several provisions aimed to revitalise high streets, of particular interest are plans to enable local authorities (district councils) to initiate a process, whereby property owners would be required to let vacant premises in a designated high street or town centre.

The Government's Levelling Up Fund (LUF) is a capital programme designed to invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK. The £4.8 billion national fund helps support town centre and high street regeneration, local transport projects and cultural and heritage assets. In Greater Lincolnshire, £30 million was allocated to two projects in October 2021 (LUF 1) and a further £62.9 million was announced in January 2023 (LUF 2).

3.2.2 High Streets Task Force

The High Streets Task Force (2022-24) is supporting high street regeneration and is facilitating selected[4] local authorities with access to expert support in areas such as placemaking, planning and design. The Task Force already provides online resources and training modules, webinars, and access to data dashboards for all Local Authorities (LAs)[5].

The toolkit has been reviewed and where appropriate the principles have been applied in the Panel's considerations.

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[3] For more information please refer to Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[4] These LAs have been allocated using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), together with a measure of retail exposure.
[5] For more information please refer to Support Directory | High Streets Task Force.

3.2.4   Parliamentary Scrutiny

A report by the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, titled *Supporting our High Streets after Covid-19* was published in December 2021 and looked at the effectiveness of the Government's various funding schemes in supporting local authorities in high street regeneration. A principle that emerged from the Committee's report was the importance of developing long-term plans that consider high streets and town centres in the round and not on a unit-by-unit basis. The Government's response to the select committee's recommendations was published in March 2022, which confirmed the importance of up-to-date Local Plans, as essential in making good use of land, resulting in well-designed and attractive places to live.

3.2.5   Planning

Most of the planning functions affecting towns is exercised by the district councils as the Local Planning Authority (LPA).

Each LPA has a different approach to retail and town centres depending on local circumstances and what challenges and opportunities exist. However, in the context of town centres Government policy as contained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states: "*Planning policies and decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation*" (Para. 86).

Further reference to planning is made in the report particularly in relation to the issues being faced by existing businesses.

3.3 Conclusions and key learnings, on what is important in a policy and funding context and how it is applied locally in Lincolnshire.

We were advised that a variety of partners are currently implementing policy and levelling up investment in Lincolnshire towns. This adopts a local, place-based approach which includes:

- The work and Town Deal investment being undertaken by District Councils. This is vital to addressing some of the most urgent cases of levelling up need in towns with awards made to the four Lincolnshire towns of Lincoln, Boston, Mablethorpe and Skegness. Investment totals £92.2 million. Further, there are awards to Grantham, Boston and Gainsborough through other funding (the Levelling Up Fund (LUF), Future High Streets Fund and Heritage Action Zones). Awards through LUF will help create an environment for town centre improvements ranging from cultural investment to health and wellbeing. Whilst there are

always challenges in these projects, not least of all inflationary factors, the projects are being delivered through extensive cross-sectoral partnership activity which is being informed by local needs.

- Further, the role of LPAs has been and will be vital for the vitality of high street ranging from applications for single buildings to significant changes in our high streets. At the same time, it is also an important mechanism to bring together other ingredients of success to high streets such as car parking, cycling storage, and public transport.

- Town and Parish Councils also play a vital role via neighbourhood plans which can bring together the local community's input and help support local shopping areas that meet local needs and will therefore drive ongoing use. Maximising coverage of neighbourhood plans will help support local shopping areas where relevant, and

- In a planning context, the Panel also noted and supported the use of outside spaces to expand the offer and reach of hospitality in town centres (this is referenced further in 6.1.2, page 29).

These points are reflected in Recommendation 1 aligned to Leadership and Policy.

4. Leadership and Strategy

The Panel sought to understand the role of Lincolnshire County Council as a leader in facilitating successful synergies and in curating effective partnerships that can help drive the best outcomes for all town centre stakeholders. These stakeholders included business tenants, owners, users, residents, visitors, organisations, and networks – both private and public sector.

We considered local authority procedures, structures, and resources as well as roles in developing strategies and plans that could enable positive changes and the evolution of our town centres.

We concurred that there is a role for Lincolnshire County Council that cements providing Lincolnshire residents with excellent services that meet their needs. That is the role of the council as a place leader (see further section 7).

Lincolnshire County Council's role is therefore twofold:

➢ to **act as a convener** of individuals, stakeholders and organisations that are needed to co-design and deliver change; and

➢ to be a **key strategic influencer** that unites all under a shared vision, mission, plan, and strategy for change.

4.1   Lincolnshire High Streets Task Force

Since 2021 the City of Lincoln and West Lindsey District Council have received direct support from the High Streets Task Force to develop local authority leadership in engaging with communities, businesses, and other public sector organisations. This aim is to diagnose barriers and adopt positive interventions to increase footfall and create the conditions for maintaining town centre viability and sustainable development. This includes support with place-making, planning and design.

Lessons can be learnt from this when pulling together a wider Lincolnshire approach to placemaking.

4.2 County Deal

The Government's County Deal programme aims to provide upper tier local authorities with a range of opportunities to enhance their ability to govern and shape the economic and social landscape of their region. In February 2022, Lincolnshire County Council, North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council prepared a prospectus: *Levelling Up Lincolnshire – A County Deal for Greater Lincolnshire.*

The transfer of decision-making powers from the Government would support Lincolnshire to make more tailored and responsive decisions that reflect the needs and priorities of its places and communities. Moreover, greater control over the budgets and resources would enable investment in those projects that would drive economic growth, enhance public services, and improve quality of life for residents across the County.

The proposed *Levelling Up Lincolnshire – A County Deal for Greater Lincolnshire* includes ten 'asks' and several of these would support the consolidation and revival of high streets:

- electric vehicle charging in rural areas, market towns and urban centres;
- improving public transport connectivity;
- active travel for routes to support our growth sectors, access to jobs and education/training, and which boosts the green and visitor economy; and
- a devolved adult education budget to grow skills.

Reference is made within the recommendations to use the County Deal as a platform to work with North and North East Lincolnshire Councils to support town centre investment as a driver of growth (see section 2).

4.3 Inclusive Growth

The Greater Lincolnshire region is committed to inclusive economic growth and levelling up, working to identify and address opportunities and challenges through strategies and visions such as Protecting, Progressing, Prospering – Greater Lincolnshire's Economic Plan for Growth and longer-term ambitions around the Greater Lincolnshire Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Framework (SIDF) and Vision 2050 (see below).

These approaches look to promote growth that is accessible for all, enabling everyone to reach their own potential and to achieve good health and well-being outcomes as per the Council's Corporate Plan priorities.

The Lincolnshire economy is often underplayed, but it contributes significantly to national productivity with well-known strengths in logistics (South Holland has the second highest concentration of logistics in the UK) and agrifood (Lincolnshire is home to Europe's largest agri-food automation and robotics cluster, three food enterprise zones, an agricultural growth zone and produces a third of the nation's vegetables). We also have emerging strengths in defence and security (capitalising on the county housing/being proximate to 40% of the RAF's assets and associated skills base) and health and care (Lincolnshire is already a world leader in rural health innovation and care).

The county offers a good quality of life, and it is attractive to people relocating to the area for employment, to retire or as a lifestyle choice.

Lincolnshire also remains a well visited tourism destination – our market towns, city, heritage, and environmental assets as well as our coastline attract domestic and overseas visitors with our natural assets presenting opportunities to promote green tourism going forward.

A key factor in all of this is the location and service offer of our market towns, towns, and high streets.

Nevertheless, there are significant pockets of deprivation in Lincolnshire and based on the aim for inclusive growth, at the heart of key Lincolnshire strategies is the desire to ensure that town centres are accessible, connected (physically and digitally) and available to everyone.

4.4   Vision 2050

In September 2022, all Greater Lincolnshire authorities agreed the 2050 Vision for Greater Lincolnshire – A Flourishing Future for All. This set out a vision for what Greater Lincolnshire will be in 2050. The extracts below focus on high streets and market towns, this sets the tone for the approach to town centre vitality within the Greater Lincolnshire Devolution deal.

"Greater Lincolnshire has a unique place in the future success of our nation as the source of clean energy, carbon capture opportunities and food security. This vision is our chance to set a new standard for what a good life is in the 21st century. (…) Our towns, villages and city high streets are hives of activity. They are great places for people to meet, and for young and old to spend their leisure time safely together. We have seen the creative reuse of buildings like department stores into spaces to live, work, and play, which seamlessly blend marketplaces and co-working spaces. New entrepreneurs are starting out on their journey, taking advantage of the creative community, and digital connectivity, inspired by their work-live opportunities. Our seaside is renowned as the best promenades in the UK, rivalling any in Europe."

Vision 2050 (and supporting strategies such as the SIDF) look to focus key aspects of growth on Greater Lincolnshire's network of towns supporting housing and economic growth, this will contribute to:

- ✓ Increased wealth (absolute and per capita)

- ✓ Improved quality of life

- ✓ A healthier society, and

- ✓ A Greater Lincolnshire economy, population and environment that can be resilient to climate change and that can benefit from future economic and technological opportunities.

4.5 Partnership Development and Engagement

The multi-faceted Town Deal partnership approach to Town Deals have been effective across the UK with 4 town deal boards in Lincolnshire. They are cross sectoral, locally driven and access a plethora of skills as required for their programmes. As with most effective partnerships, they have evolved and developed and have drawn heavily on local consultation, input and feedback.

We believe that effective partnerships emerge where the working conditions are positive, there is a clear vision and shared aspirations and participants are encouraged to aspire, innovate and '*think outside the box*'.

By aligning partnership roles, expanding participation, and empowering partners to challenge current thinking, collaboration will have the greatest impact.

The sections below look at some further strategies, plans and partnership boards that form part of the panel's review.

4.5.1 Local Transport Boards

Local Transport Boards (LTBs) are joint bodies developed across the main urban areas and larger market towns across Lincolnshire.

LTBs *"are at the heart of local delivery and enable partners to consider and develop interventions and schemes that reflect the locality and are founded upon a sound evidence base. They are also able to integrate schemes into local programmes and packages enabling*

greater efficiencies and the ability to make significant improvements across all modes and against a wide-range of objectives"[6].

We believe that connectivity should be a regular agenda item for LTBs, when designing, reviewing, proposing interventions, and delivering the local strategies. The Panel heard from many contributors about the importance of access to our town centres – whether getting there by bus, car, foot, or bike - access was vital.

The LTBs across Lincolnshire will provide a strong forum for a debate on the impact of transport and travel decisions on Place. Through both:

➤ Key transport strategies such as the Bus Service improvement Plan and

➤ LTP 5 (see below) when updated considering expected government guidance later in 2023 – particularly in terms of decarbonisation opportunities.

These Boards are also reflected in a further recommendation based on their make-up, terms of reference and ability to link local and strategic discussions for place-based discussions.

4.6 Traffic Regulation

The LTB is also a good forum to test and engage on Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs).

A key role for the County Council is in managing traffic and parking, principally through the making of Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). For example, TROs can be used to:

- restrict traffic to certain areas;

- restrict certain types of vehicles to certain times of day or days of the week;

- manage parking by introducing limited waiting times; and

- apply restrictions to an area which means that yellow lines do not have to be used, if an area is environmentally/visually sensitive.

4.6.1 Resourcing TRO Team

In Lincolnshire there is a small, dedicated team processing TROs[7]. A key focus is on addressing issues around schools, but TROs can also be used to facilitate the effective operation of high streets and can accordingly contribute to the local business environment, if circumstances

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[6] For more information please refer to Lincolnshire Local Transport Plan 5.
[7] Further information on TROs is contained in **Appendix G.**

allow, by managing appropriate traffic flows and parking regimes. This can be best implemented by a whole-area approach rather than piecemeal change.

However, there are issues with the time it takes to deliver the formal legal processes for TROs and the capacity in the team. In February 2022, a backlog of about 200 traffic regulation order requests was reported. A standard TRO will take around four months if there are no objections; and up to eight months if objections are received.

> It is welcomed that during this review, enhanced resources have been provided to support the TRO team in terms of capacity to deliver the statutory processes. This will help support the 'whole-area' approach and facilitate some of the issues businesses raised on parking in town centres and market towns.

4.7   Lincolnshire Local Transport Plan 5

The Lincolnshire Local Transport Plan 5, which was approved in 2022, has scope to:

➢ Develop local LTBs and local town transport strategies to identify schemes at the local level;

➢ Improve connectivity across towns and engage with local communities for the latter to contribute to the on-going development of transport solutions across the county;

➢ Utilise the LTBs to develop and introduce improvements to local walking and cycling networks; and

➢ Support the provision of local facilities and services to enable people to live locally and lower their carbon footprint by reducing travel distances.

4.8   Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Framework 23

The Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Framework 23 (SIDF)[8] was commissioned by the Greater Lincolnshire Infrastructure Group and supported by eleven local authorities in Greater Lincolnshire and Rutland. It seeks to support the infrastructure theme of the County Deal and is aligned to inclusive growth and net zero aspirations.

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[8] More details on SIDF 23 can be found in **Appendix D.**

The SIDF details the areas where strategic infrastructure investment, as a driver of inclusive growth, is most needed in Greater Lincolnshire. It supports:

- Transport (roads, rail, ports, aviation, rural public transport and active travel), digital, energy, water and waste infrastructure that is fit for growth.

- Housing stock that is affordable, healthy, sustainable, accessible and represents an environment attractive to housing investment (including in town centres).

- Business infrastructure that can create more high value jobs, innovate and increase productivity.

- Prosperous, accessible high streets and market towns which showcase their unique identities and instil a sense of ownership and pride in our residents while attracting visitors to our area; and

- A healthy population with access to appropriate services and resources that help them achieve wellbeing and a good quality of life.

The SIDF also promotes a reduction in transport-related carbon dioxide emissions and the protection/enhancement of the natural and built environments, through advocating for sustainable transport solutions, supporting the introduction of low-carbon technologies, and reducing reliance on fossil fuels, by seeking to support and co-ordinate activities around:

- active travel routes that support our growth sectors (including green tourism), enabling access to jobs, and boosting the green economy;

- the introduction of low carbon technologies and developing access to alternative transport fuels including hydrogen;

- the strategic distribution of electric vehicle charging points and energy distribution;

- investment to upgrade the region's bus fleet to improve the uptake of public transport, to meet the green agenda and create passenger growth / post pandemic recovery;

- upgrades to existing railway stations and promoting new stations in key rural areas to enable greater accessibility to rail services and alternative commuting options; and

- improved internal connectivity to enable residents to access jobs, training, and leisure opportunities within Greater Lincolnshire.

4.9   Green Masterplan

The Council's Green Masterplan[9] is a multi-year programme running until 2050 to ensure that Lincolnshire meets the national carbon reduction targets. Initial projects include reducing carbon emissions by 20% through a carbon management plan; installing low energy streetlights; delivering low carbon heat to buildings; assessing buildings for solar panels; creating a sustainability decision-making tool; and exploring electric vehicle opportunities.

4.10   Conclusions on Leadership

The Panel concludes that there must be a strong emphasis on leadership and co-operation in successfully promoting thriving high streets.

We recognise the role of local leadership in championing and supporting the evolution of the high street and whilst the lead organisation or individual (a business leader for example) can differ by locality, high streets need a cohesive and coherent partnership behind them which has knowledge of that area, has resources, a vision and a significant profile and credibility.

Whilst the public sector's role is important, the role of the private sector is also critical, in terms of knowledge, expertise and investment. To facilitate change in larger town centres, success has been accelerated by public sector leadership when providing a vision for regeneration (e.g., Town Deals). In smaller centres, the public sector remains a vital partner but does not necessarily have to lead.

Local authorities also play a vital leadership role when utilising knowledge of local geography, economy, and community and in where engagement and consultation is required to identify barriers and solutions.

We also note that connectivity is critical to the health and vitality of high streets – digital and accessibility (roads, rail, public transport, cycle, and pedestrian) and associated infrastructure (cycle parking, car parking, electric vehicle charging). The council has a role in supporting this.

However, the panel wants to support appropriate actions in town centres that contribute to decarbonisation and support green infrastructure and green growth. The Green Masterplan and the SIDF 23 will be useful guides in helping achieve this in line with regulatory measures (planning etc) and partnership approaches.

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[9] For more information please refer to Green Masterplan – Lincolnshire County Council.

In this context, we concur that:

- In line with the work of the 2019 High Street Vitality Working Group, Lincolnshire High Streets are not without challenges but rather than dying they are changing. Change is at varying pace with some town centres experiencing fundamental change whereas the experience of others is more incremental. The differentiation is largely based on size, primary and secondary functions, location and the level of local partnership collaboration and aspiration.

- The most successful town centres are transitioning wholly or in part from predominantly retail areas to accessible places supporting leisure, living, *and* shopping with unique and compelling visitor offers.

- Cross sector collaboration and a high street that is green, clean, and accessible opens the town centres to new audiences and users - particularly young people.

- Engagement and strategy support a balanced interplay between town centres and the community – with town centres as a destination, which provided a sense of belonging, a focal point with heritage, culture, and local distinctiveness. This allows local people to connect with the place and promoted use.

- Accordingly, there are successful and well embedded partnerships in Lincolnshire dealing effectively with work town centre viability and vitality. There is also a plethora of strategies. To bring these together, LCC needs to be able to effectively bring strategic activity that addresses local needs particular around inclusive growth and connectivity. To do this in a timely and effective manner, it is logical to use the LTB's as existing partnership networks which are individually well versed in local issues and opportunities and bring in knowledge from other local partners/activities.

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Recommendation 1 - Leadership and Policy

That our support be recorded for:

That Lincolnshire County Council engage annually with each of the established 8 Local Transport Boards to discuss town centres. This will bring together local strategic partners to discuss and agree actions to address local town centre issues and opportunities and will promote cohesive action with short-, medium- and long-term outcomes.

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This builds on the Panel's conclusions set out in section 3.3 that recognises the need for:

- **extensive cross-sectoral partnership activity which is being informed by local needs**.
- proactive planning and collaboration as an **important mechanism to bring together other ingredients of success to high streets** such as car parking, cycling storage, and public transport and
the vital role of **neighbourhood plans** which can bring together the local community's input and help support local shopping areas that meet local needs and will therefore drive ongoing use.

Further the LTB approach will provide opportunities for towns and villages, in close proximity, to work together to best effect.

5. Lincolnshire's Towns

5.1 Greater Lincolnshire

Greater Lincolnshire represents a varied mix of distinctive places. The Greater Lincolnshire economy is diverse and dispersed, which brings both opportunities and challenges. The Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) and most recently the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership's (GLLEP) Economic Strategy use the idea of 'spatial corridors' to reflect economic and sectoral geographies. This cuts across towns, market towns and a city. The region is bordered by a 186-mile coastline to the east including the South Humber bank to the north, Sheffield City Region to the Northwest, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, and Cambridgeshire to the east and the south.

Looking at Greater Lincolnshire's towns and market towns, the areas, and audiences that they serve (residents, visitors, tourist etc) and their cultural and physical connectivity to the wider county reflects a developed place-based approach. This accords with current economic plans and showcases the wealth of activity happening within and across the county.

Further, there are strong retail and hospitality offers but it is the distinctiveness of the towns in Lincolnshire that can be leveraged to make them more competitive with like for like towns outside of Greater Lincolnshire and in acting in partnership and offering complimentary and not competing offers, further strength will be achieved by leveraging multiple offers – perhaps connected to spatial corridors already referenced. For example, across coastal Lincolnshire, South Lincolnshire, greater Lincoln, and the rural heartlands.

5.2 Which towns?

The Panel has considered various ways to select representative Lincolnshire towns for deeper analysis[10]. The start point was the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) definition of a town having a population of 10,000 or more. Below that threshold, the ONS defines places as Built Up Areas (BUAs). Using these definitions there would be:

- eleven towns in Lincolnshire, plus the City of Lincoln;
- nine BUAs with a population of 5,000 or more; and
- sixteen smaller settlements with a population of circa 2,000 to 5,000.

As identified, the Panel selected four places which it considered representative of the issues, and which gave a spread of size, geography, and function. The rationale for their selection is

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[10] See **Appendix C** for further details.

set out below in Table 2. The towns are not listed in order to focus on the lessons and to avoid distraction of hyper-local analysis when the Panel's intent is to provide recommendations for the whole of Lincolnshire:

Table 2 Case Studies - Rationale for Selection
A 'smaller town' to the north of the county and a town already undergoing a locally led review.
A BUA and an example of a coastal town with a seasonal economy with Towns Fund investment.
A BUA and example of an historic market town and major service centre.
The largest BUA and an important market town and service centre in the south of the county.

The Panel commissioned detailed analysis of the four towns. This was provided by OpenPlan. The main findings from the analysis are set out below and are considered applicable to all towns in Lincolnshire.

5.3   Case Study Lessons

The case study identified key themes to improve place and commercial interaction. The themes include:

- Supporting community involvement in place-making to drive ownership and connection of local people to local place and promotion of local distinctiveness as a key asset.

- Focusing on the assets of greatest value to users. In many towns this relates to revitalising/maximising use of market squares/key historic environments.

- Ensuring that:
  - car parking is accessible and can be found (signage/enhanced linkages) but avoiding car parking becoming a prime use of prime assets, it is a facilitator of town centre usage;
  - pedestrian and cycling connections are better integrated to access key spaces such as markets with the rest of the town - including employment areas close to, but outside of, town centres;
  - pedestrian priority and accessibility are achieved for people with disabilities; and
  - the creation of 'social streets' leveraging pedestrianisation be supported, offering an environment where people dwell and spend their leisure time.

- Local residents and local businesses need to be directly involved in developing their town centres to create/reinforce a collective local vision and local identity.

- Spaces need to be animated (events, local markets) – local people need to be involved in how this is done and what products are developed. If there is a space that can become the 'go to' for successful events which has sufficient size, accessibility, facilities, and profile this should be developed.

- Where there are draws away from town centres (such as in coastal towns where the beach is a distance from the high street) linkages need to be promoted (physical and animation) to better link and connect the two assets.

- Promote local businesses wherever possible; and

- Provide support for educational institutions in town centres and the opportunity for residents to up-skill and for young local entrepreneurs.

6. Lincolnshire High Street Businesses - Challenges and Opportunities

6.1 Introduction

During the review, the Panel received contributions from the Federation of Small Businesses Lincolnshire (FSB) and the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce. The FSB is a membership organisation for the small business community in the UK, with around 170,000 members, from single-person businesses to organisations of up to 249 staff. FSB in Lincolnshire has 3,000 members and acts as a lobbyist for the small business community across Lincolnshire.

On 12 April 2022, the FSB published a report called *Local Leadership - How Local Authorities Can Support Small Businesses*[11]*.*. The report made a series of recommendations to county and district authorities across the UK. In their presentation to the Scrutiny Panel on 26 April 2022, FSB focused on some of the national recommendations that would apply in Lincolnshire. Of those, we concurred that the below could be employed by Lincolnshire County Council to inform this review, accounting for the role of an upper tier authority. Details of all of FSB recommendations are included in **Appendix E.**

6.1.1 Engaging with Small Businesses

1. *Building direct relationships with the business community - face-to-face contact is important for building trust with small businesses and local business groups, fostering good long-term communication. This also includes meeting with businesses who may not have an obvious presence on the high street or physical business premises.*

Councillor Tracey Carter was cited as an example of someone who had built relationships locally and is well-connected to the business community in Holbeach. Being visible and showing representation from LAs was important both as a means of understanding issues and identifying if local government can assist. Businesses valued this contact.

6.1.2 Planning and Environment

2. *Embrace the 'al fresco' and allow businesses to make the most of their outdoor space by utilising new planning powers, where appropriate.*

It was noted the emphasis on more people dining outside since the pandemic, and the widespread emergence of a café and pavement culture. The Panel would support the FSB's

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[11] Available at Local leadership | FSB, The Federation of Small Businesses).

premiss to encourage this, where possible, through the planning system or other decision-making process, to allow businesses in leisure and hospitality to embrace the use of outdoor space. This would help drive the diversification of the high street to expand town centre leisure/hospitality functions quicker, making the high street look busier and enabling people to increase their dwell time - staying longer and spending more locally and adding to the visitor draw of town centres and in particular market towns.

6.1.3 Procurement

3.   *Pay invoices within 30 days or sooner and ensure that these terms are passed down the supply chain.*

The FSB referred to some poor practices, where businesses had been waiting over 80 days for payment. Sometimes, businesses had to forgo 10% of the invoice if they wanted to get paid quickly. This was particularly prevalent during the pandemic but has endured beyond in some areas. The FSB is encouraging councils to set an example and to pay invoices within terms.

In the case of Lincolnshire County Council, the aim is to pay from 28 days of the date of invoice taking into account the 'No Purchase Order Number, No Payment policy'. Further, the Council seeks to work with local suppliers when appropriate. For contracts valued between £10,001 and £25,000 at least one local supplier will be invited to quote, and the local supplier chosen where they offer Value for Money. Above £25,000 to the Public Contracts Regulations Threshold (£213,477 for goods and services and £5,336,937 for works) at least two local suppliers will be invited to tender.

Nationally government is seeking to award £1 in every £3 to small businesses and this is mirrored in local government contracting to drive growth and benefit locally.

6.1.4 Regulation

4.   *Adopt a "support first, enforcement second" approach across your regulatory services, with a focus on reducing the regulatory burden.*

The FSB's the national recommendation is "support first and enforcement second" approach, as some small businesses did not necessarily have all the skills and all the knowledge to manage every regulatory burden.

The Council provides a free general advice service to businesses and explains the law related to specific queries. The advice service is however limited to one hour but can be 'topped up' to address more detailed queries or where tailored advice is required on various subjects including safety of consumer products, legal requirements for websites and internet sales, food labelling, customer rights and business training.

The Council's Trading Standards service recognises that the majority of businesses set out with the intent to comply. The council has discretion as to whether to bring civil and, or criminal action and will do so based on whether it is satisfied that the circumstances of the alleged offence, in the context of one or more public interest factors, outweighs the mitigation factors.

6.1.5 Business Rates

5. *Keep business rate lists and data up to date, including properties which qualify for Small Business Rates Relief. Good data is critically important for both the collection of rates and should grants need to be paid out to those in receipt of rates relief. Knowing who the business owner is, and how to contact them can be critical.*

The importance of keeping business rate lists and data up to date is acknowledged as an essential way of engaging and communicating with businesses and for maintaining information channels enabling for example the encouragement of *eligible businesses to apply for Small Business Rate Relief and to access any other form of support.*

The Panel noted and supported this based on the experience built up from the administration of grants and support during the pandemic when databases were used effectively to drive maximum take up and awareness of support.

6.1.6 Greener High Street

6. *Create a 'greener' high street by encouraging zero or low emission transport methods, providing Electric Vehicle (EV) charging points, and highlighting accessible pedestrianised routes and spaces.*

As an example of this, use of EV charging points to attract people to town centres and to balance accessibility/connectivity needs with creating a greener high street.

The Panel heard about the LEVI Pilot in the county and supported the focus on smaller towns to test take-up/demand.

6.1.7 Absent Commercial Landlords

7. *Tackle the problem of absent commercial landlords who allow empty properties to fall into disrepair.*

The FSB highlighted the number of vacant premises in towns, some of which had been left vacant for tax purposes, resulting in properties falling into disrepair. This led to vandalism and the perception of a 'sorry-looking' high street which was not performing well with the potential to deter investment.

The Panel noted that whatever can be done locally to tackle absent commercial landlords should be implemented in line with government initiatives and policies.

6.1.7 Parking

8. Addressing parking would have the single biggest impact on bringing people back to town centres.

FSB surveys identified that 70% of small businesses felt that free parking, or at least easy access to parking, would make the biggest material difference to footfall and therefore to their income.   Whilst recognising this as a common 'business ask' it was not always possible for a variety of reasons including the provision of free short-term slots (30 minutes) – although it was felt that the latter could encourage regular spending in shops as people would be put off if they had to pay for an hour, when they only needed ten minutes.

In response to this, the Scrutiny Panel indicated that it was not in favour of timeless free parking as a general principle because free spaces could be used by those working in a town (including business owners), rather than by the shoppers.

The Panel did however support the premise of half hour on-street free parking spaces where it was possible. The Panel did however stress the importance of enforcement to make this work.

6.1.8 Access to banks

9. Seventy-four percent of businesses had experienced bank branches closing in recent years reducing access to cash in more rural areas.

Banks had traditionally been seen as a bedrock for market towns and high streets, particularly in more rural areas. With branches closing this was disproportionately impacting the elderly and the vulnerable who still favoured cash and were unable/unwilling to move to online banking. This not only impacted footfall but also local businesses. Where cash was used, the businesses had no means of banking it locally, adding journey times, costs and increasing security concerns if this was not done on a daily basis. As Lincolnshire is large and rural sometimes the nearest bank could be forty minutes away.

6.1.9 Other Issues

Following 17 months of on-and off closure during the pandemic, this had not only impacted the business but had led to increased stress among the business owners themselves. Further, post covid businesses were also dealing with:

- recruitment and labour challenges including the affordability of staff;
- reduced footfall (in some cases);
- ongoing adjustments to changing consumer habits – including moves to online shopping;
- a business rate system that was 'antiquated' and awaiting review particularly in respect of re-rating;

- business rents volatility - 56% of FSB business members stated that rent levels had been an issue, with over half stating that if there had been rent regulation, it would have made things easier;

- Energy cost rises;

- Shifting payment trends away from cash to debit and credit cards (and associated costs of processing these payment);

- The impact of the loss of large retailers/anchor tenants in high streets that acted as a draw for shoppers; and

- Reduced accessibility to nighttime offers when linked to public transport services.

6.1.10 Optimism

The FSB's small business index (April 2023) looked more promising, despite the issues being experienced, with trends indicating the potential to exceed pre-pandemic levels. This is not an index focused specifically on the high street/retailing/hospitality etc and these sectors did in fact return negative confidence scores, the worst of all sectors. However, they were not as pessimistic as previous returns and reflected the fact that consumer spending had held up better than forecast. Nonetheless, there were revenue growth concerns due to the relative low-cost margins of the sector. Further UK wide, there was negative growth in employee numbers.

"Weaker growth aspirations align with the general economic uncertainty and low growth trajectory of the wider economy. Looking at businesses by sector, those in accommodation and food service activities are the least likely to anticipate growth over the coming year, with this being the case for just 17.8% of respondents. For the wholesale and retail sector, the net balance figure stood at 28.0%. Both sectors continue to face pressure from weaker consumer activity amidst declining living standards. Nevertheless, the share expecting growth in wholesale and retail is greater than was the case in Q4 2022, when just 37.5% of small businesses in this sector expected to expand over the coming year. This highlights the shift in sentiment between these periods"[12].

6.2 Business Support in Lincolnshire

The way that Business Support is funded is changing nationally. European funding came to an end in June 2023 and has been replaced with UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) which has been allocated by the UK Government to lower tier authorities. The overall aim of the UKSPF grant is to help restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging. As noted earlier in the report, supporting local businesses is highlighted as one of three central themes of the funding.

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[12] Small Business Index, Quarter 1, 2023 | FSB, The Federation of Small Businesses

In Lincolnshire, each district must make their own decisions about how UKSPF is allocated, depending on their knowledge of local needs. Lincolnshire County Council does not have direct access to UKSPF and has no alternative significant funding sources to deliver business support at scale through the existing Business Lincolnshire Growth Hub www.businesslincolnshire.com , which has developed over many years utilising significant amounts of European funding. The Growth Hub is part of the national business support service, delivered at a local level since 2015, it receives a small amount of funding from the Department of Business and Trade for operational and management but has to rely of securing external funds for business support delivery.

A Business Lincolnshire UKSPF Shared Service programme has been offered to all ten local authorities within the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) area which includes Lincolnshire, North and North East Lincolnshire and Rutland. Local Authorities can use their UKSPF funds 'buy into' this service to meet their business support needs. The UKSPF Shared Service includes a mix of generalist business advice and specialist advice (including retail, leisure and hospitality and digitisation), specialist programmes (including a retail, Leisure and hospitality programme) and a workshop programme supported by a communication campaign. The programme continues to offer a ladder of progression for businesses from start-up, business growth and   scale-up.

As of September 2023:

- six authorities have opted in to the shared service model– City of Lincoln Council, North Kesteven District Council, Rutland County Council, South Kesteven District Council, West Lindsey District Council and North East Lincolnshire.

- Discussions are in progress with North Lincolnshire Council

- Three authorities have opted out. These are Boston Borough Council, East Lindsey District Council, South Holland District Council.

Enquiries from businesses in these areas will now be managed by the respective Local Authority Economic Development Teams, who will identify appropriate business support solutions for the businesses in these areas[13].

In addition, some Districts are offering/considering additional support services for local businesses. For example, North Kesteven District Council wish to extend their net zero offer with a dedicated Low Carbon Adviser and West Lindsey District Council have procured a Retail Sector Adviser.

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[13] All businesses regardless of their location, will continue to be able to access the many self-service tools and information available on www.BusinessLincolnshire.com.

Recommendation 2 (High Street Businesses)

We recommend that:

(a) That the County Council lobbies those organisations that restrict businesses and support further streamlining of administrative processes for town centre businesses, including licencing.

(b) That the County Council be supportive of High Street businesses by developing a Single point of Contact (SPOC) for town centre matters; and streamlining processes internally to support businesses.

(c) That the Business Lincolnshire Growth Hub seeks to support an enterprise culture in town centres where services are available.

(d) That opportunities be considered through regulatory services, such as Trading Standards, to offer selected business advice to support town centre business start-ups.

(e) That a pilot be explored to '*keep the local spend local*', working with Lincolnshire County Council's procurement, partners and existing '*buy local'* initiatives.

7. Placemaking, Funding and Skills

7.1 Place

Frequently the concepts of place and placemaking were raised at our meetings. In this context, a *place* can be identified as:

- where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose.

Placemaking is:

- the collaborative process of turning a space into a place where it is desirable, relevant, and welcoming. In effect the art of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of a place and its communities whilst considering its design, location, infrastructure, services and most importantly, its residents and users.

We were told that places can be shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them. Hence, place is a more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land, and buildings across all sectors within a place, enabling better outcomes for everyone and increased opportunities for people and communities to shape their own lives.

7.2 Placemaking

Placemaking can refer to a process of shaping public space. It is an important aspect of community engagement aimed at identifying assets and resources within a community and harnessing the ideas, skills and assets around the individuals that take part in the process. It helps to identify barriers that can be addressed to create strong and resilient and connected communities. Placemaking aims to build on and enhance a places local distinctiveness and to create bonds between people and place, in improving the quality of a place it will in turn benefit the wider community and region.

We were advised that by understanding the physical, social, and economic characteristics of a place, placemaking can create a positive impact on the quality of life for residents.

Thoughtful placemaking can create high quality spaces that are inviting, safe, and accessible for all. Additionally, placemaking can foster a sense of identity and belonging among residents. By understanding the community's strengths and weaknesses, placemaking can be used to create a space that is reflective of the community's values and character. From the

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evidence before us, we have concluded that collaborative placemaking can be an instrument for accessing and transforming public areas into spaces for dialogue, integration, and democratic engagement. What is more, this can lead to the creation of healthier, safer, and greener places for our residents and places where businesses can contribute, benefit and prosper.

We concurred that good practice involves:

a) an audit of all current and potential partners/active groups and organisations in an area to understand who the stakeholders and influencers are;

b) a review to determine if there is any synthesis in areas/interests/activities focusing on:

- access and linkages
- comfort and image
- uses and activities and
- sociability

(See diagram 1 below [14])

c) based on the outcome, the development and provision of support to facilitate a collective, cross sector vision and thereafter to align activity to it.
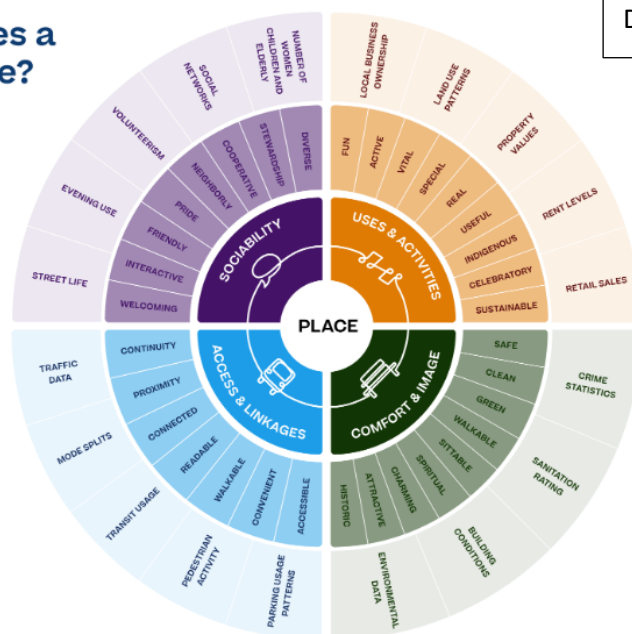

Diagram 1

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[14] For further information visit - What Makes a Successful Place? (pps.org)

7.3   Self-Contained Places

As part of our evidence gathering, we received information on the concept of fifteen-minute and twenty-minute neighbourhoods. A fifteen-minute or twenty-minute neighbourhood is a neighbourhood where residents can access most (and in a few cases all) of their needs within a short walk or bike ride from their home.   In effect, such neighbourhoods can become as far as possible *'self-contained places'*. We stress that self-contained places are a matter of choice, as individuals are of course free to shop, engage in leisure activities or use certain public services wherever they wish.

The concept of *'proximity'* has been identified as a key barrier and a challenge to be overcome in contemporary towns and one that is associated with sustainability and viability of the built environment. The challenge became more prominent in the context of the pandemic.   As part of this, the concept of *'walkability'* arose, with reference to a vision for pedestrian walkable distance of complete and self-contained places.

> The key elements of a **self-contained place** in summary could be:
>
> ✓   development of a social and functional mix;
> ✓   engagement of the public (people living within a specific area) in urban planning processes (aimed at that specific area);
> ✓   improvement of walking and cycling infrastructures, and an aim to reduce the use of private vehicles for everyday local activities; and
> ✓   where appropriate, the decentralisation of core services with flexible uses.

The principle of 15-minute neighbourhoods is more usually associated with larger urban areas and supports local use and reduced carbon. Such tight neighbourhoods are difficult in smaller rural areas, but pioneering work has been undertaken in the Highlands and Islands with a slightly extended and proximate 'travel time' 20 Minute Neighbourhoods in the Highlands and Islands[15] and is also being developed in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

Concepts include embracing sustainable travel, using the 20-minute principle as a target, aligning community action and public and private sectors to support and deliver the principle through neighbourhood and/or local plans. Additionally, addressing action not just around the presence of buildings, facilities and transport but aligning around services, resources and community collaboration and all concepts of daily life (education, employment, housing, public services, access to outdoors, movement from rural to urban etc.)

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[15] For further information visit - https://nickwrightplanning.co.uk/20mns-highlands-islands.htm

7.4 Benefits of Self-Contained Places

The benefits of such a model are often cited as follows:

- Economic benefits – Self-contained places could lead to a boost to local economies across the seven districts, by encouraging more customers to shop locally, supporting more local businesses, in turn stimulating local employment.

- Environmental Benefits - Reducing long-distance travel has an environmental benefit, reducing transport generated emissions. Introducing greener spaces would enable new community assets and increases biodiversity.

- Health and Wellbeing benefits - Walkable places introduce healthier lifestyles. In addition, a greener environment is likely to have a positive impact on mental health, through opportunities for play and recreation for adults and children. Interactions within the local community can address isolation and loneliness. Improved air quality will also contribute to better health outcomes.

- Viability and inclusivity of Communities - This is a long-term aspiration that would facilitate local people spending more time with their social and family circle within their localities and where places are inclusive, accessible, and enjoyable for individuals of all ages and abilities.

7.5 Capacity Building and Skills

We were advised that placemaking 'capacity building' involves providing training and coaching, utilising best practices, and engaging with professional bodies and networks of key practitioners.

Options to take this forward include:

- Linkages to existing partnerships with professional memberships and organisations, such as the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) that can provide additional support and expertise through programmes such as Excellence in Place Leadership; and

- The development of an internal toolkit and training programme aimed at supporting and understanding the importance of placemaking throughout the county council's services and utilisation of key toolkits and strategies including:
  - The Department of Transport's 'Gear Change – A bold vision for cycling and walking' looks at better streets for cycling and people, putting cycling at the

heart of decision making, enabling people to cycle, and be protected and empowering local authorities to lead and implement change; and

o Homes England's 'Building for a Healthy Life' looks at integrated neighbourhoods with walking, cycling and public transport at its heart, distinctive places with well-defined streets and spaces and streets for all with blue green infrastructure, cycling and car parking and above all healthy streets.

Through adopting capacity-building initiatives, Lincolnshire County Council should seek to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of place-making and equip the Council with the skills and knowledge needed to deliver high-quality outcomes. We believe that adoption and implementation of capacity building programmes (which would follow the European Regional Development Fund technical assistance model[16]) will support in place-making skills being diffused across services to deliver outcomes through training and champion programmes.

7.6 Becoming Place-Ready for Investment

The local authority strategic convening role involves creating a supportive environment that attracts commercial investment to areas. This includes working with local stakeholders to identify opportunities for investment and to develop a shared vision for an area's future.

To constitute a place investment ready, Lincolnshire County Council should undertake a range of activities, including infrastructure development, planning, and zoning changes, public-private partnerships, and work to identify and address barriers to investment, such as regulatory hurdles or access to finance.

7.7 Viability and Vitality

Drawing on the work of the High Streets Task Force, we accept that both viability (economic performance and yield) and the vitality of high streets are important. Further, there is more to the high street than retail. It can encompass health and fitness, leisure, housing, workspace, entertainment, arts/culture, and even education. We acknowledge that a high street with a wider offer is more inclusive and attractive to a wider audience.

We also acknowledge that economic viability is strengthened by integrated actions, governance, policy, and leadership to support social and cultural, technological, and

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[16] For more information on this model and operation visit - European Regional Development Fund

environmental aspects of the high street. The graphic (diagram 2) below sets out the inter-connectivity.

Beyond economic viability
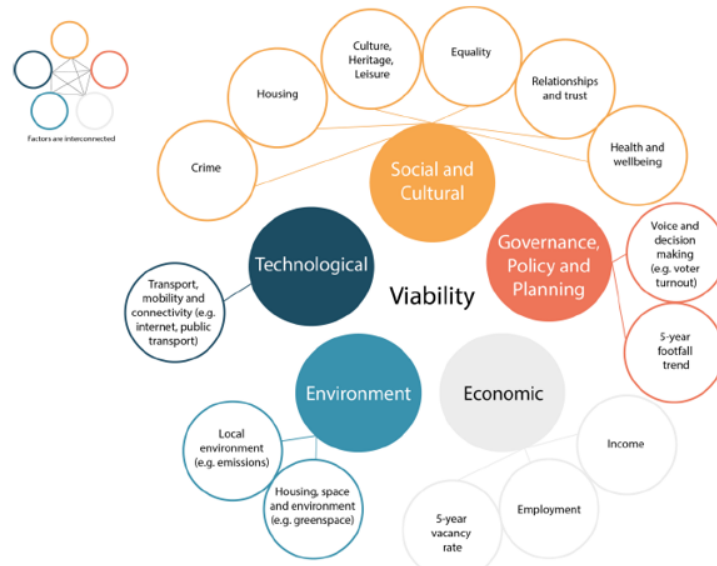
7.8 Survey of Town and Parish Councils

The Panel issued a short survey to 21 town and parish councils during 2022 to seek their views on their local town centres. They were asked to provide the following information:

- the current state of their town centre, including changes over the last five years and the impacts of the pandemic;

- initiatives or events to stimulate footfall or activity in the town centre and examples of good practice to increase activity in the town centre; and

- other issues related to their town.

7.9 Findings of the Survey

Ten councils responded (Alford, Coningsby, Crowland, Holbeach, Horncastle, Long Sutton, Louth, Mablethorpe and Sutton, Market Rasen and Sleaford). We have identified the following themes from these responses:

- Town / parish councils are generally supportive of local initiatives and organisations, promoting a range of activities in their areas. These initiatives can include the voluntary sector and local businesses.

- The loss of retail bank branches has impacted town centres, as their premises can remain empty, and footfall has fallen because of their closure.

- There is a variation on the impacts of town / parish centres, with one reporting no empty retail premises. Several respondents identified empty premises as a negative feature, as too many empty premises create a less attractive environment for people visiting the town centre. Nevertheless, in one response, a difference between perception and actuality was cited – in other words the view that there are lots of empty premises is not necessarily supported by data.

- Several responses refer to issues such as managing housing development, conservation areas and planning enforcement as examples where there could be improvements (noting that these are District functions).

- Funding challenges across the public sector have been recognised, for example the availability of funding from the County Council and the district councils. Similarly, the availability of funding from other sources has reduced.

- Parking has been identified as an issue (cost and availability).

- Improving public transport and providing facilities for cyclists; and

- There is an acceptance that the composition and role of high streets will evolve from the traditional retail function to more varied services and facilities, for example, leisure, and even housing.

The Panel has selected the following from the survey as examples of good practice. However, in each case these ideas are beyond the remit of the County Council in terms of resourcing or actioning.

- Town Councils assuming responsibility for off-street parking.
- Digital Initiatives:
  - QR Code linking to town websites.
  - Town digital notice boards
- 'Shop-Local' Leaflets
- Footfall counters to understand numbers and town centre usage patterns.
- Mural art to make the environment more attractive.
- Repurposing former bank buildings and/or creating Banking Hubs, and
- Restoring disused public sector premises for community use.

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7.10 Our Conclusions on Place-Making and self-contained places.

We believe that Lincolnshire's market towns and larger villages support or have the scope to support the basic principles of self-contained places, as many of Lincolnshire's towns and villages have a range of retail outlets, a post office, a GP surgery, pharmacy, and various community facilities. However, we acknowledge that for many people in market towns and villages they need to travel for these and other essential services. In addition, people have a choice, and are entitled to use any of the facilities in neighbouring towns. Furthermore, Lincolnshire's communities vary significantly in nature (urban or rural) and purpose. Our communities are not only defined through essential services, but also by characteristics, such as location, history, local economy, and demography.

The principles of self-contained places and placemaking align with the Lincolnshire County Council vision, 'working for a better future' by "*supporting high aspirations; enabling everyone to enjoy life to the full; creating thriving environments; and, providing good value council services*"[17]. However, the council cannot in isolation deliver this in terms of expertise, funding and the decision-making powers required. The role of partnership outlined earlier in the report is essential to delivering this together with community engagement and capacity building.

Having considered all the evidence, the Panel has concluded that there is a role for placemaking and self-contained places in Lincolnshire, as a means of improving the livelihood, viability, and prosperity of Lincolnshire town centres. We feel that efforts should be made to prioritise the principles of excellence in placemaking across services as a key means of maximising economic, social, and environmental outcomes in our Lincolnshire high streets.

> ### Recommendation 3 – Placemaking, Funding and Skills
>
> **We recommend: -**
>
> (a) That Lincolnshire County Council work with North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council to recognise the vital role of market towns in Greater Lincolnshire and to review opportunities for appropriate funding and budgets to support their viability and vitality (including infrastructure provisions) as a key ingredient in growing the economy of Greater Lincolnshire (referenced in Section 4 – Leadership and Strategy).
>
> (b) That the County Council encourage good design across town centres through its development management functions and through partnership working with teams at Local Planning Authorities and other stakeholders.

[17] For more information, please refer to Lincolnshire County Council Corporate Plan

(c) That design excellence, local distinctiveness, and character of town centres are encouraged through partnership working (under guidance from the Historic Places Team); and that quality public realm offers/green spaces are created to provide residents and visitors with the opportunity to increase dwell time and to support health and wellbeing objectives and help develop Lincolnshire's visitor economy (this links to Recommendation 2b).

(d) That consideration be given to each County Councillor receiving a £3,000 budget to support local activities aimed at increasing town centre footfall. Funding to be allocated through an established criteria and aligned to the work and findings of the LTBs (this links to Recommendation 1).

8. Technology, Innovation and Digitisation

8.1 Applications of Technology

We were advised that technology enables a wide variety of benefits:

- **Using spaces differently** – use of technology to make town centres environmentally friendly and sustainable and to understand the usage of spaces and how they can be improved.

- **Business support** – digital innovation can facilitate the changing needs of customers including online retailing and the skills needed for businesses to adapt and implement it as well as ways to increase an area's digital presence and showcase it as a place to use and visit.

- **Connectivity with heritage** – use of digital technology to connect people with a town's assets (relating to the Extensive Urban Survey work of the Council).

- **Traffic management** – use of technology to understand trends and to support town centre traffic management. For example, sensors can be used to monitor traffic flow, and variable message signs can be used to provide real-time information to drivers; and

- **Parking** – electric vehicle charging points and use of payment technologies (such as app-based solutions) to optimise residents and visitors' experience in our towns and high streets.

However, digital connectivity, digital skills and access to digital mediums are required. The Panel recognised the importance of technology to support sustainable uses, business resilience and growth opportunities and to enable new markets/audiences to be accessed. Lincolnshire County Council has a unique opportunity to leverage its digital and electric vehicle infrastructure leadership and contract management roles to support this.

8.2 Broadband

94.7% of premises have access to superfast broadband in Lincolnshire (>24Mb/s[18] download speeds). This is expected to rise to the national average of 97% during 2023 because of the existing Building Digital UK[19] (BDUK) contract. Gigabit coverage currently sits at 36.6%[20]. The

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[18] Mb/s = Megabyte per second.
[19] For more information please refer to Building Digital UK
[20] Further information on coverage at a specific address can be found at BT Broadband (btwholesale.com).

Council will be extending their ongoing BDUK contract to cover a further 2,500 premises in addition to the current 8,000. The 10,500 premises will receive download speeds of >100Mb/s as a minimum, with many getting >1Gb/s[21].

To create the right conditions for business growth partiularly in the high street, digital connectivity is essential. This must be scalable and future proofed provision with access, speed and capacity to support the needs of businesses and addressing digital inclusion for all residents. This can be a challenge in rural areas where businesses can often miss out on higher quality connections.

Without public investment to incentivise broadband proviers – in largely rural areas – there will be disadvantage and ongoing digital exclusion. This will particularly impact the growth and sustainability of micro businesses and SMEs (98% of the Greater Lincolnshire business base) many of these are high street businesses.

There are also needs in the visitor economy to enable the product to be developed further particularly in sparse or rural areas including access to mobile apps that will support resident engaement, increase the visitor offer and suport businesses and cutural and heritage engagement. To this end two pilots to 'digitise the high street' are referenced further in Section 10.

8.3   Project Gigabit

The government's Project Gigabit[22] seeks to increase capacity to at least 85% of premises by 2025 and 100% by 2030. A bid is being made to BDUK's GigaHub Scheme[23] to connect 150 public buildings in the county.

The Council is working with suppliers to further expand community fibre broadband schemes under the existing Rural Gigabit Connectivity scheme. There are currently several large schemes in various stages of development which are expanding the number of communities involved.

The government is providing up to £210 million worth of voucher funding[24] as immediate help for people experiencing slow broadband speeds in rural areas. The Council is actively encouraging individuals and businesses to take up the scheme. There is also the fibre-to-the-premises scheme focusing on the south in Stamford, Deepings, Boston, Bourne, Grantham, Spalding, and Sleaford.

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[21] Gb/s = Gigabit per second
[22] For more information refer to Project Gigabit Delivery Plan: winter update - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[23] For more information refer to GigaHubs: key information - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[24] For more information refer to Gigabit Vouchers (culture.gov.uk)

We, however, noted that whilst gigabit speeds are game changing, the government's 'workable speed' of 30Mb presents challenges to inclusive growth and town centre suatainability, especially when there are significant numbers below that speed.

In summary, we recognise the vital role of superfast broadband, and note the important role that the authority plays in providing better access for businesses and communities. We feel that as an authority Lincolnshire County Council must take a firm view on developments and on the visual impact of some 5G infrastructure, and therefore lobby the government so that planning authorities have a greater say in the siting of 5G infrastructure.

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Recommendation 4 - Technology, Innovation and Digitisation

We recommend that:

(a) That Lincolnshire County Council takes a firm view on developments and lobby government so that planning authorities have a greater say in the siting of 5G infrastructure.

(b) That the County Council support initiatives to drive digital skills amongst people who work in town centres, where appropriate.

(c) Lincolnshire County Council test community and visitor opportunities to '*digitise the high street*', working in partnership with local areas to ensure content is created and managed in real time, along the lines of the pilots currently being developed in Holbeach and Mablethorpe (this will build on the work of the Council's Historic Environment Team and look at other opportunities to animate spaces including the use of pop-up museums).

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9 Data Driven Decision-Making and Targeted Investment

9.1 Data and Place

The Panel acknowledges that data is imperative in developing our learning and understanding of our towns, villages, and high streets. It is essential in making cases for scaling up successful activity, bidding for external funding and making business cases for new activity. Collating data about our places, including those of businesses and other key stakeholders plays an important role in knowing our places and understanding why people visit our towns and how they use the spaces. This information, in conjunction with 'perception data', will help differentiate between the needs of residents and those of visitors and where those needs align.

This information can be important for attracting new investment into town centres. Further, profiling town centres is more than getting people into shops, it is also about attracting skilled individuals from outside of the county to live in Lincolnshire, because of attractive market towns and town centres providing the environment for everyone to 'live, work and play' (Vision 2050).

The evidence presented by the FSB and the Chamber of Commerce earlier in the report indicates that joining forces with businesses and partners on a localised level, sharing information and exchanging data will be of mutual benefit not only in assessing trends, creating foresight of needs (especially unmet needs), but also helping to monitor the impact of decision making in 'real time' enabling greater agility and resilience in interventions.

9.2 Use of data in Lincolnshire towns

We considered information in relation to the County's visitor economy. We were advised that the Council uses the Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor (STEAM) to quantify the local impact of tourism. STEAM is widely accepted by the industry as an evaluation model and harnesses data from a variety of sources including hotels, venues, and attractions. STEAM quantifies the local level of both overnight and day visitors, through analysis and use of a variety of inputs including visitor attraction numbers, tourist accommodation bed-stock, events attendance, occupancy levels, accommodation tariffs, macroeconomic factors, visitor expenditure levels, transport use levels and tourism-specific economic multipliers.

The Panel is confident that ongoing use of STEAM data will allow Lincolnshire County Council to better understand visitor trends and develop collaborative solutions to increase day visits and overnight stays to Lincolnshire with a focus on towns.

Many towns have footfall counters. This information, where available, can help inform decision making in terms of where footfall is increasing/decreasing, fluctuations during the week – perhaps spiking in line with a key event or market. These can also identify pedestrian flow and when footfall is at its peak e.g., summer season. This could be vital to informing partnership activity to support planned interventions in town centres.

In the Technology, Innovation and Digitisation section earlier in this report, there is reference to traffic management technology and to electric vehicle charging points as part of the LEVI pilot. This will also collect data (where anonymised) which will also inform interventions and decision making.

Furthermore, the Virtual Immersive Environment (VIE) pilots (further reference in Section 10) will use data to determine the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of use/take up, effectiveness and issues relating to access and connectivity. This data, as with all pilots, will inform a stop/go approach to next steps and if the initiative is considered value for money, the data will inform the adaptation of the product and the costs involved in set up and maintenance, should it be rolled out to other towns.

> ### Recommendation 5- Data-Driven Decision Making and Targeted Investment
>
> **We recommend that:**
>
> That data and lessons captured through pilots, including digital highstreets and Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure fund are used to inform better business cases to support interventions and investments in town centres.

10 Heritage and Visitor Economy

10.1 Lincolnshire Extensive Urban Survey – Heritage

The Panel reviewed the Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) project recently completed by the council's Historic Places Team. Part of a national programme funded by Historic England, the aim was to better understand the historic development and its influence on the character of Greater Lincolnshire's towns. The survey included a total of 30 towns, with the County Council working in partnership with North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council.

The EUS has produced historic urban character assessments focused on the evidential, historical, aesthetic, and communal attributes of the individual towns surveyed. This has provided an opportunity to look at the modern-day town at the hyper local level and used digital mapping to plot the changes in the towns over time. More details on the findings of the survey may be found in Appendix H**.**

The Panel recognises the value of the EUS project and the information and data that it has collected. There is value in using the information to showcase Lincolnshire towns by promoting tourism, supporting local planning; enhancing community engagement; and providing educational resources.

The benefits of this work demonstrate the distinctiveness of each town with supporting maps and digital maps for each of the thirty towns covered. Various benefits and interdisciplinary opportunities were discussed, and the reports provide a data led approach to support future place shaping.

The EUS information is currently being used to develop two high street digitisation pilots that the Panel has recommended be developed to support further actions (Recommendation 2e).

The two pilot projects are being developed in Holbeach and Mablethorpe, which were selected due to:

- funding opportunities targeted in these areas;
- the availability of historical evidence and mapping from the EUS, and
- the opportunities to demonstrate specific outcomes in these towns with Mablethorpe harnessing community development and local history learning and Holbeach adopting a pilot focused on business engagement.

The aim is to create a virtual immersive environment (VIE) for both high streets with the objective of driving new footfall, encouraging new visitors, and re-engaging the 'place' with the local community.

The VIE will have interactive hotspots that will reveal some of the hidden histories of the high street's architectural and social past. The VIE will be a digital creation of exterior spaces and produces a self-led tour of a space or place and can be viewed online or via a mobile device.

Information hotspots or points of interest can be added via text, images, videos, and audio. Multiple copies of a space can be created with hot spots adapted to appeal to a particular audience, for example to businesses or residents.

In Mablethorpe an underspend on the Coastal Communities Fund programme is being used to support digital reimaging of the high street. This will look to engage schools and students in content creation and harnessing local history components in the Key Stages 1/2 national curriculum. Pupils will engage with family members to collect local stories and develop an understanding of 'place identity and its heritage'. These stories will support the story telling.

In Holbeach the focus will be around providing businesses with an opportunity to advertise events and offers and the potential to operate local discount schemes. Whilst telling residents and visitors the hidden story of Holbeach, it will also function as a mobile town notice board.

Other links to heritage were discussed by the Panel including the use of pop-up museums in vacant properties to both animate the space and engage resident and visitors with local heritage stories. Opportunities to undertake more of this type of activity would be welcome, subject to accessing appropriate external funding.

10.2 Visitor Economy

Market towns make a significant contribution to the visitor economy in Lincolnshire, both in terms of attracting tourists to that town and being a fundamental part of the offer of the wider hinterland. In the case of Lincolnshire, this is particularly true for those seeking active walking and cycling holidays on the coast or in the Wolds for example. Tourism and hospitality are also a source of employment in market towns.

Market towns attract a significant amount of tourism spend from visitors who come to explore the area. This includes spending on accommodation, food and drink, attractions, and shopping, which in turn supports local businesses and boosts the local economy. The presence of extra visitors creates more of a buzz in a town and adds to its vibrancy.

This also increases local employment opportunities in market towns, ranging from jobs in hotels and restaurants to positions in tourism-related businesses including attractions and venues.

Market towns often have a rich heritage and unique character that makes them attractive to visitors. In Lincolnshire there is a wide breadth of heritage and many of the smaller market towns are historic urban settlements of interest to visitors. The tourism industry, in turn, can help to preserve this heritage by supporting investment in the restoration and maintenance of historic buildings and landmarks led by the private sector.

Market towns often host a variety of events and festivals throughout the year, from farmers' markets and craft fairs to music festivals and cultural celebrations. These events can also attract visitors from outside the area and help to boost the local economy. In Lincolnshire examples include the Beyond the Wood's Festival (Horncastle), the 1940's Festival (Woodhall Spa), the Holbeach Music & Beer Festival, and the Forbidden Forest (Grantham). The CEO of the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce advised the Panel that collaboration in towns was key and that opportunities to link festivals and events to attract tourists and encourage them to stay longer should be explored – creating complementarity and not competition.

In Lincolnshire, tourism is a priority economic sector and as such is critical to the economic prosperity of the county. The Lincolnshire visitor economy was worth £2.49 billion in 2019, falling to £1.24 billion in 2020 and recovering to £2.03 billion in 2021, not quite pre-pandemic levels but displaying a degree of resilience. In 2021, there were 22.7-million-day trippers to Lincolnshire, a reduction of 26% compared to pre-pandemic levels, but an increase of 58% on 2020.

The presence of a thriving tourism industry can help to attract investment into market towns, including funding for infrastructure improvements (as referenced earlier through the SIDF) and the development of new tourism-related businesses and with them jobs and a higher quality of place for residents.

The Council has been active in tourism since the early 1990s, undertaking a strategic place leadership role, focusing on promoting, inspiring and attracting visitors to Lincolnshire via Visit Lincolnshire (www.visitlincolnshire.com) The website seeks to enhance the visitor experience, this includes local, national and international visitors. The strategic objective is to increase the number of higher spending staying visitors to the county. The website receives am impressive number of visitors and it can track the conversion rate from looking at an accommodation providers page to a booking.

Some of the key elements that contribute to creating a vibrant mix that attracts visitors to a market town, includes:

- **Historic character:** Market towns that have preserved their historic character and architecture can be very attractive to visitors, creating a sense of charm and uniqueness that is difficult to find elsewhere.

- **A range of independent shops:** Market towns that have a diverse range of independent shops, boutiques, and artisanal businesses can be very appealing to visitors, as they offer a unique shopping experience that is different from the homogenised offerings of larger towns and cities.

- **Markets and events:** Markets and events can be a great draw for visitors, creating a lively, festival type atmosphere that encourages people to linger and explore. Farmers markets, craft fairs, and food festivals can all be effective in attracting visitors.

- **Cultural attractions:** Market towns that have high quality cultural attractions, such as museums, galleries, and performance venues, can provide a draw to visitors who are interested in learning about the history and culture of the area.

- **Natural beauty:** towns that are located / are proximate to areas of natural beauty, such as the countryside or by the coast, are more attractive to visitors who are looking for a relaxing break or want to combine it with walking or cycling activities.

- **Food and drink:** Market towns that have a thriving food and drink scene, with a range of pubs, cafes, and restaurants, can be very attractive to visitors who are looking for good quality, locally sourced food, and drink.

- **Walkability and accessibility:** Market towns that are easy to walk around and have good public transport links can appeal to visitors, as they offer a convenient and stress-free way to explore the town and the surrounding area.

The Panel also acknowledged other key learnings, including that:

- It is crucial to know your visitor and what they want out of a visit so that you can adapt an offer or leverage a key asset.

- Locals, like visitors, want cleanliness, a good range of shops including independents, and eateries.

- Day trippers exceed overnight visitors in numbers and are worth £940 million to the local economy, whilst fewer staying visitors add significantly more contributing £1.08 billion to the economy. Staying visitors want variety which includes heritage,

shopping, walking, cycling, and bird watching. Packaging of these elements is being developed further by Visit Lincolnshire. To support this work:

- o Walking and cycling facilities are required including safe cycle storage. This is referenced in Section 11, Recommendation 6b) and

- o The availability of walks is being digitally developed on special webpages of Walking on Visit Lincolnshire[25]. When complete the Coastal Path will have its own area as will the Viking Way which is currently undergoing several route improvements.

- Effective parking provision, signposted and accessible must be available. Pay on exit arrangements are preferable to encourage longer dwell time and, as referenced earlier in the report, short periods of free parking encourage a churn of visitors.

10.3 Green Tourism – Ambassador and Toolkit Offer

The Council is already working with tourism businesses to develop their green offer, and this is likely to be increasingly appealing to staying visitors.

The Council has already piloted a green tourism toolkit[26] with coastal businesses which has been rolled out in 2023. There is an opportunity to adapt this specifically for market towns. The Toolkit is divided into People, Planet and Place and is supported by training and an ambassador programme.

The key findings from the pilot showed that many businesses had a very narrow view of what 'going green' entails and this was a barrier. The training addressed this perception and provided a forum for businesses to share and discuss problems and solutions. The opportunity for businesses to be Green Ambassadors after completing the course and getting a plaque was seen as a massive draw for the business participation. Collectively, green tourism and a form of accreditation although not unique, help sets the offer apart and differentiates it from other tourism products.

Market towns offer a variety of opportunities to leverage green tourism coupled with their heritage offers and proximity to walks, cycle routes and green spaces including the Wolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) and nature reserves. The Green Toolkit could present an opportunity to communicate this in a co-ordinated way, putting the market town as the destination in a wider offer. When working together, towns can also leverage complementarity not competition as referenced earlier in the report.

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[25] For further information visit - Walking - Visit Lincolnshire
[26] For further information visit - Green Tourism Toolkit - Business Lincolnshire (visitlincolnshire.com)

Dependent on the results and in line with work to develop the towns area on the Visit Lincolnshire website, there could be opportunities to take this a step further by including the development of a town level green indicator. This would help in identifying natural and heritage assets and promoting other 'green provisions' such as the percentage of businesses participating in the green ambassador programme; levels of secure cycle storage; Electric Vehicle charging provision etc.

In addition to the obvious benefits of green tourism training and the ambassador programme, increasing numbers of people are seeking green products and services – there is a proven consumer demand particularly with younger audiences and it can be a key ingredient to staff recruitment and retention, again particularly with younger people.

As a key ingredient of business sustainability, there is a shift towards focusing on the local area, green businesses have the potential to create a whole host of positive impacts for their local area including:

- Celebrating a sense of place in promotional materials and collaborative promotion of green businesses;

- Enhanced engagement between businesses and cultural heritage networks;

- Employment of local staff;

- Business generated initiatives to support wildlife and plant life;

- Opportunities for staff and customers to be more environmentally aware;

- Engagement of staff in sustainability initiatives;

- Adoption of responsible purchasing policies;

- Percentage increase of goods and services provided by local suppliers;

- Monitoring/management of energy and water consumption with the objective of reducing it;

- An increased focus on the circular economy and in particular the waste hierarchy: refuse, reduce, reuse, repurpose, recycle; and

- Supporting local walking and cycling.

10.4 Our Conclusions on Heritage and the Visitor Economy

The Panel recognises the importance of supporting and maintaining the Lincolnshire visitor economy as a key element in securing the future of our high streets and market towns.

Not knowing enough about a place is the key reason for not visiting (2017 Non-Visitor Research). It is not that Lincolnshire doesn't offer what visitors want, but that they do not always know what it has to offer. The analytics for Visit Lincolnshire increasingly show an interest in searching for 'market towns' to visit. Ways to convert searches to visits are being developed still further with video content, additional text, and photographs. This should not be just about what the town has to offer, it should be seen as a base, cross-selling nearby attractions. For example, Louth can be sold as an excellent base for visiting the new King Charles III National Nature Reserve and the King's England Coastal Path.

The Panel welcomed that the Visit Lincolnshire portal had been established and saw opportunities to cement and enhance it as a centralised place for mapping Lincolnshire's cycling and walking routes and linking that 'offer' to that of market towns.

This can be enhanced by the Council in collaboration with district partners in the form of local apps to promote local offers. The pilots to 'digitise the high street' will offer further learnings to engage businesses, residents, and visitors with specific town *offers* utilising heritage knowledge and data captured though the EUS and will help cement a sense of place.

The Panel also recognises the widespread opportunities that green tourism can afford the high street and in particular Lincolnshire's market towns. To this effect a recommendation on Green Tourism is included in Section 11.

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11 Green Growth

11.1 Net Zero

The government published its Net Zero Strategy in October 2021. This set out how the country will deliver its commitment to reach net zero emissions by 2050 through a variety of activities, tools, initiatives, and projects.

The strategy also lays the foundations for businesses to invest in the UK's green economy, taking action to ensure that the UK has the right skills to deliver a green industrial revolution and committing to work with industry to develop sector and supply chain action plans in areas where the UK has an economic advantage.

11.2 Local Strategies and Programmes

Opportunities to deliver net zero in Lincolnshire are referenced in the Council's Green Masterplan. Managed by and Environment Programme Board the plan looks at addressing the most pressing actions to reduce carbon and our impacts on the environment. Over the period to 2030, the County Council and its partners will deliver a carbon management plan aiming to reduce carbon emissions by 5,700 tonnes by 2023 (phase 1) and to deliver a heat decarbonisation plan, instal low energy LED[27] lamps in streetlights an create a sustainability decision making tool to ensure that sustainability is considered in council decision making.

The SIDF meanwhile focuses on decarbonisation and other responses to climate change that support sustainable growth and help achieve Net Zero targets. This is in the context of enabling innovation in low carbon technologies and renewable energy particularly in zero emission vehicles, mass transit and the decarbonisation of rail travel.

It is recognised that towns and high streets offer a significant contribution to achieving net zero targets through transitioning. This could also support green growth.

Town deal activity supports net zero transition and net zero targets are embedded within the principles of Devolution for Greater Lincolnshire which in turn will support the green recovery of the high street and programmes such as LEVI scope out opportunities to deliver electric charging in rural areas, market towns and urban centres.

District councils have all developed capacity to deliver environmental and sustainability outcomes, this is largely focused on internal carbon reduction plans and housing retrofit programmes supported by annual funding allocations.

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[27] Light-emitting diode bulbs.

The South and East Lincolnshire Council Partnership has established the South and East Lincolnshire Climate Action Network to work with businesses and communities.

11.2 Opportunities

Activities that the Council can add value to in this space over and above the plans and activities outlined in 11.1, are varied.

Easy fix opportunities to explore include:

- Scaling up the Council's Zero Carbon Parishes project – building on the success of this, there is scope to expand this and support environmental installations and initiatives in key towns as a start point to 'going greener'. Examples of previous activity includes a public water drinking fountain, a bike repair scheme, and a variety of biodiversity projects.

- Provision of a Green Hospitality and/ or Retail Guide - promoting independent businesses at the Lincolnshire level. Through this business commitment and action on a wide range of "green issues" that align with the Council's Green Masterplan will be demonstrated and linked with its benefits for the visitor economy and visitor experience.

- In response to the lack of bike parking sites in towns and in the context of the Panel's support to improving connectivity in towns and encouraging cycling – undertake a programme of providing Sheffield stands (a cost-effective provision).

11.3 Circular Economy

The circular economy is a model of production and consumption whereby products are shared, leased, re-used, repaired, refurbished, or recycled for as long as possible. It is a model which moves away from fast fashion, fast consumption, and disposal, and from the current linear economic model based on '*take, make, dispose*'.

Any transition to a circular economy will require behavioural change and addressing geographic barriers (particularly in a rural area). Piloting real life examples and processes will help residents and businesses understand the benefits and further refine understanding and practical opportunities.

Recommendation 6 - Green Growth

We recommend that Lincolnshire County Council: -

(a) Develop a digital Green Retail/Hospitality Guide aimed at supporting independent businesses.

(b) Improve facilities to encourage bike use on high streets (basic Sheffield stands) – linking to the work of the LTBs.

(c) Encourage the use of service budgets to improve outcomes through investing in pilot activity, where benefits are aligned to the County Council's aspirations for inclusive green growth.

12 Conclusions

A wider review of Lincolnshire town centres and high streets was needed to consider how Lincolnshire County Council could support Lincolnshire's high streets to maximise existing opportunities, to achieve economic and environmental sustainability, to recover from the pandemic and to help stimulate a visitor economy as well as to support job creation in town centres. This was in the context of other key players and authorities also delivering change in the high street, coupled with changes catalysed by consumer behaviour and national and regional economic performance.

The Panel considered a vast amount of varied evidence over the 14-month review period drawn from a combination of interviews, presentations, policy and best practice reviews and engagement with specialists from local communities. The Panel also commissioned case studies and surveyed stakeholders.

The Panel's conclusion is that the high street is not dying but nor is it thriving. There are huge variations in performance across the county and this is dictated by a town's retail and hospitality offer, its location, accessibility, connectivity, and investment in that place as well as external factors such as the wider economy, the cost-of-living crisis, and the lasting impact of the pandemic.

There is no silver bullet and no one stakeholder holds the solution. Only collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination through strong leadership and a shared vision can begin to provide the right support at the right time to Lincolnshire's towns.

This said there are huge opportunities in our high streets – harnessing their unique sense of identity, their heritage, working with businesses and communities and harnessing their pride in their places, knowing our audiences and being aspirational. The Panel sets out in the report that "(…) *there are opportunities in Lincolnshire to consolidate, expand or develop place-based activities that will create town centres that attract people to visit, shop, socialise and do business*". Holistic actions to present the high street at its best are needed.

The Panel's recommendations are strategic and seek to add value to developing vital and viable town centres in Lincolnshire, these are cognisant of budget constraints across the public sector and largely focus on leadership and facilitation to create an environment for change that responds to the local needs of each town. They are also future facing in terms of net zero and use of technology. There is also particular recognition of the symbiotic interplay between market towns and the visitor economy bolstered by unique heritage and natural assets or proximity to such.

The Panel believes that the Council in the roles of a place leader, convener and influencer can help drive positive change in Lincolnshire's high streets aimed at making them more diverse in use, resilient and adaptable and to promote them to new users as thriving, exciting places where residents and visitors can enjoy new experiences and where businesses can succeed, and local employment opportunities can grow.

Our recommendations as set out in the main report, are now at the disposal of Lincolnshire County Council Senior Leadership and Executive Members and reflect where the County Council can add value to the activity of other stakeholders and prioritise activity based on its strategies, budgets, and capacity.

13 Key Contributors

Scrutiny Panel A would like to thank the following contributors and officers for their advice and support during this scrutiny review:

- Councillor Colin Davie, Executive Councillor for Economy, and Place
- Councillor Tom Dyer, Executive Support Councillor for Economy, and Place
- Justin Brown, Assistant Director – Growth
- Vanessa Strange, Head of Infrastructure Investment
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- Mary Powell, Place, and Investment Manager
- Ian George, Historic Places Manager
- Nicola Grayson, Extensive Urban Survey Project Officer
- Jeanne Gibson, Programme Leader, Minor Works, and Traffic
- Simon Beardsley, Chief Executive, Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce
- Katrina Pierce, Development Manager, Lincolnshire Federation of Small Businesses
- Steve Kemp, Director, OpenPlan
- Kiara Chatziioannou, Scrutiny Officer – Project Manager for Scrutiny Panel A
- Simon Evans, Health Scrutiny Officer
- Nigel West, Head of Democratic Services and Statutory Scrutiny Officer
- Thomas Crofts, Democratic Services Officer

Further Information

If you would like to find out more about this Scrutiny Review or Overview and Scrutiny at Lincolnshire County Council, please contact the Scrutiny Team at scrutiny@lincolnshire.gov.uk.